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ZHOU EN-LAI AND THE NORMALIZATION
OF RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES
CORE COURSE I ESSAY

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It is highly ironic, and yet instructive, that the seeds for ending almost a quarter century of bitterness between China and the US were sown in the late '60s during the height of the Cultural Revolution and after the election of the foremost anti-Communist of the '50s, Richard M. Nixon, as President of the United States. The casual observer might have expected the situation to worsen, especially in light of continuing differences over Taiwan and Vietnam. Yet less than three years after his inauguration, Nixon made his now-famous trip to Beijing. What brought about this dramatic change? Why did ideology, so long the stumbling block between any improvement in US-China relations, suddenly fade from the forefront of the dialogue? Quite simply, the international balance of power appeared to the Chinese leadership to be entering a period of uncertainty and change. Ideological considerations, never unimportant, took a back seat to a more basic vital interest-- survival of China as a nation. The case study of Zhou En-Lai and the normalization of relations with the United States is a classic example of balance-of-power diplomacy in action.

From Zhou's perspective, the late '60s saw significant change in the international environment. The United States and China had a history of vitriolic relations that dated back to the '40s and the US decision to support Chiang Kai-Shek during the Chinese Civil War. The low point occurred in late 1950 with

Chinese intervention against the US in the Korean War Continued US support for the Nationalist regime in Taiwan throughout the '50s and Chinese support for North Vietnam in the '60s prevented any improvement in the relationship. But Zhou saw a different US in the late '60s--one torn by dissent over the war in Vietnam and racial strife Perhaps, he also saw an opportunity for improved relations as the US sought to find an "honorable" way to disengage from Vietnam and resolve its internal disputes.

China's relations with the other superpower, the Soviet Union were never as close as the myth of monolithic Communism that held US policy in its grip during the '50s and '60s suggested. Stalin's failure to provide meaningful support to the CCP during the Chinese Civil War and the very limited support it provided during the early '50s combined with Mao's resistance to Soviet direction on ideological grounds to keep the relationship distant and cool Mao broke openly with the USSR in 1956 and the ideological split widened throughout the '60s. By 1963, the Central Intelligence Agency observed that "the USSR and China are now two separate powers whose interests conflict on almost every issue." (Gaddis, p 210) Chinese concern over Soviet "social imperialism" grew throughout the '60s and was heightened by events such as Soviet support for India in border clashes with China's ally Pakistan, support for Lon Nol in Cambodia, stationing of a large military contingent in Egypt, the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the establishment of the Soviet

navel base at Cienfuegos in Cuba A series of border clashes along the Ussuri River in 1969 and veiled Soviet threats about preemptive attacks brought Sino-Soviet relations to a new low

Two other nations play key roles in the changing international environment of the late '60s: Japan and India The miraculous growth of the Japanese economy and the Sato government's reaction to the Nixon Doctrine of "Asianization" caused Zhou to become concerned about rising Japanese militarization and the possibility of a Tokyo-Taipei alliance China's long-standing dispute with India over the border regions in the Himalayas took on increased importance as the Soviet-India relationship grew. Zhou may have sensed an change in the international environment which saw Soviet influence on the ascent, American influence on the decline and regional powers moving towards alliances that might not be in China's best interests. In Nye's terms, a shift from a balance of power between the US and USSR to possible Soviet hegemony may have caused Zhou to move towards improving US-Chinese relations.

Domestically, China was just emerging from the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution in the late '60s. Initiated by Mao to reinvigorate a Chinese Communist Party apparatus that had lost its revolutionary zeal in the comforts of bureaucratic power, it soon proved difficult for Mao and Zhou to keep under control:

It was a magnificent abstraction which waged undifferentiated struggle against "modern revisionism", "imperialism" and "reaction". As "infantile disorder

on the left" it represented "all struggle and no alliance" (Keith, p 185)

Mao, the revolutionary theorist, was probably more comfortable with the course of events, but Zhou, the pragmatist, certainly had an ideological tightrope to walk, balancing the demands of the Revolution with the realities of international politics. He came under fire from the radical elements of the Party, particularly the Defense Minister Lin Biao, but was close enough to Mao and enough of an ideologue to survive the attacks of the extreme left. Zhou and Mao concluded as the Cultural Revolution drew to a close, that Soviet "social imperialism" was "the more serious internal threat to Mao's revolution". Zhou was able to convince Mao that China's interest lay in the direction of both struggle and alliance, and normalization of relations with the US became part of their "united front" strategy as the decade drew to a close.

The election of Richard Nixon in 1968 and the continuing US inability to solve its Vietnam problem afforded Zhou an opportunity to move towards reestablishing relations with the US. Although Kennedy was inclined to support normalization of relations with Communist China for foreign policy reasons, he was unable or unwilling to pay the domestic political price.

(Gaddis, p 230) Johnson felt likewise constrained:

I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the

rise of Joe McCarthy. (Quoted in Gaddis, p 242.)

Nixon, however, had unimpeachable credentials as an anti-Communist and, in a 1967 article in Foreign Affairs, had concluded

...taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place in this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation. (Nixon, p 137)

This openness towards rapprochement with China, combined with a penchant for behind-the-scenes diplomacy, made the Nixon-Kissinger team the perfect partner for Zhou

Zhou recognized the vital national interests of China were its security as a nation state and the continuance of the socialist march towards communism in China. Other major interests included the support of the advance of socialism towards communism outside of China and the economic prosperity of China. While seeking improved relations with the US as a counterweight to the USSR, he also sought to maintain freedom of action for China. Zhou saw China's future as tied to neither the US nor the USSR, but instead as the leader of the nonaligned nations of the Third World. (Keith, pp. 195 and 198). While security against Soviet "hegemonism" was primary, Zhou never abandoned the other interests. Like Bismarck a century earlier, Zhou sought to be the fulcrum between other great powers; unlike

Bismarck, he maintained his flexibility by avoiding "entangling alliances"

The Chinese plan of action was based upon Mao's notion of "dual tactics" within a "united front" strategy. This:

. required "both unity and independence" and distinctions made "between the primary enemy and secondary enemy and between the temporary allies and indirect allies". On the issue of shifting political alignments, Mao had stated, "This united front is neither all alliance and no struggle, nor all struggle and no alliance, but combines alliance and struggle". (Keith, p 198)

While Zhou attempted to improve relations with the US as a counterweight to Soviet "social imperialism", he "did not wish to precipitate a break in state-to-state relations with the Soviets". (Keith, p 202) To do so would have placed China in a dependent position for US support. Additionally, Zhou had to insure he could adequately justify his "flexible application of principle" to other communist and nonaligned small states such as Albania and Algeria as well as against charges levied by domestic rivals such as Defense Minister Lin Biao.

Zhou employed several tools of policy to achieve his goal of normalized relations. The earliest contacts with the Nixon administration were through their respective embassies in Poland. After these bogged down due to US military operations in Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971, diplomacy moved from the official to the unofficial domain with the visit of the US table tennis team to Beijing in April 1971. After the US responded by further

relaxation of trade and travel restrictions for private citizens, Zhou shifted diplomacy back to the official state-to-state arena. An invitation for an American envoy to visit Beijing was passed through the Pakistani Ambassador. Kissinger's secret visit in July 1971 allowed he and Zhou to agree upon the agenda for the improvement of US-Chinese relations. The two decided upon a focus of confidence-building while placing the main issues of difference--Taiwan and Vietnam--upon the back burner.

While consensus building continued in private diplomatic discussions, Zhou continued to attack US imperialism in public diplomacy, both in the slogans and posters for Chinese consumption as well as grist for the American public in the visit of Huey Newton and 59 other Americans and the 9 August interview with columnist James Reston. China's admission to the United Nations in October provided another forum for Chinese diplomacy, particularly in its relations with the Third World.

During the negotiations with Nixon and Kissinger, Zhou insisted that their differences not be hidden and the Shanghai Communiqué be given an "untruthful appearance". Initially hesitant, Kissinger eventually concurred: "A statement of differences would reassure allies and friends that their interests had been defended; if we could develop some common positions, these would then stand out as the authentic convictions of principled leaders" (Kissinger, p. 782). This was

particularly important for Zhou's "selling" of this initiative to the Chinese Communists and their Third World cohorts.

Zhou also moved to improve relations with Japan after the fall of the Sato government by signing a joint communiqué in which China renounced all reparations claims from W.W.II in return for Japanese recognition of the Peoples' Republic of China as the sole legal government and of Taiwan as an "inalienable part of the PRC". (Keith, p 203 ; Finally, while clearly engaged in balance-of-power diplomacy with the US, Zhou successfully integrated his high-minded "five principles of peaceful coexistence" into US-Chinese relations.

Zhou's "dual tactics" proved to be highly successful, and his policy of normalization of relations with the US continued after the fall of Nixon and the death of both Mao and himself. He was able to restore the geopolitical equilibrium between the US, the USSR and the Third World (read China) without losing any freedom of action. China continued to espouse its ideological line while moving into expanded economic and political interaction with the West. The public airing of differences with the West in the Shanghai Communiqué allowed him to withstand charges of treason from domestic hard-liners such as Lin Biao as well as foreign communist leaders in Albania and Vietnam.

On the negative side, the isolation of Taiwan has had an unexpected result: the emergence of Taiwan as an economic power on the world as well as regional stage. The cutting of the

umbilical cord to the U.S forced the Taiwanese to revitalize their economy, becoming much more efficient and competitive. The rise of a nationalist ruling party in Taipei has called the "one China" policy that both Communists and Nationalists had subscribed to into question. While quiet, bilateral negotiations between Taipei and Beijing continue, it is uncertain when unification may become feasible

The events of the Tiananmen uprising still hamper the development of closer US-Chinese relations. Human rights issues are the major stumbling block China continues to view this as an internal affair and views international interference as a violation of the "five principles of peaceful coexistence". The collapse of the Soviet Union has removed a major Chinese incentive for improved relations with the U.S , and China will probably continue to pursue economic development on terms of its own choosing

Zhou's statesmanship, along with that of Nixon and Kissinger, offers several lessons for American statesmen and strategists. First, ideology will usually take a back seat to nationalism Monolithic communism was a bogeyman that never really existed, yet it held US foreign policy captive for over twenty-five years. Is our view of the Islamic movement today similar to our view of communism in the '50s? Second, "secret covenants, secretly arrived at" are a necessary part of furthering the national interest It is hard to imagine that

even Nixon would have been able to overcome a early determined Congressional attack on his secret attempt to begin the normalization of relations with China, particularly while trying to disengage from Vietnam. Third, the approach of open disagreement on issues of principle should not hold hostage foreign policy that furthers the nation's vital interests. American leaders need to reevaluate the linkage of human rights to improvement of relations with China. It appears the current administration has done this in the last several months.

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